

VZCZCXRO7011
OO RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHDM #0641/01 2451312
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 021312Z SEP 09
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6788
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN PRIORITY 0202
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0694
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 0097
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 0654
RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM PRIORITY 0102
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0693
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000641

SIPDIS

LONDON FOR LORD, PARIS FOR NOBLES
DEPARTMENT FOR PRM/ANE, NEA/ELA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/02/2019

TAGS: [KHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: IRAQI REFUGEES EXPRESS CONCERN OVER DETERIORATING
SYRIA-IRAQ RELATIONS

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Iraqi refugees serving as community outreach organizers for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) expressed concerns about the recent deterioration in Syrian-Iraqi relations and the withdrawal of the countries' respective ambassadors from Baghdad and Damascus. Not trusting the situation in Iraq enough to return, however, refugees see little choice but to remain where they are. UNHCR and NGO representatives are following events closely and hope the recent tension does not negatively affect Iraqis living in Syria. Although UNHCR has noticed an increase in new registrations in the wake of Syrian-Iraqi tensions, UNHCR staff also report a steady stream this summer of Iraqi refugees applying for assistance as their resources dwindle. Some Syrians privately are responding to Iraqi demands to turn over Iraqi Baathist officials by saying, "If you want us to return four Iraqis, why not take the other million here." But we have heard from reliable sources that President Asad personally has instructed officials and journalists not to question Syria's continuing support of Iraqi refugees. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) In the two weeks following the August 19 bombing attacks in Baghdad and the subsequent decisions by the SARG and Iraqi governments to withdraw their ambassadors from their respective capitals, Iraqi refugees, NGOs, and donors have expressed concern that tension between Iraq and Syria would negatively affect Iraqi refugees here. Poloff heard similar concerns expressed in a series of meetings in late August with Iraqi women serving as outreach coordinators for UNHCR, adolescent refugees in a registration center, and UNHCR officials.

¶3. (C) A group of Iraqi refugee women serving as community outreach organizers for the UNHCR told Poloff that Iraqi allegations of Syrian involvement in the August 19 bombing attacks had fueled widespread concerns that Iraqi refugees would not always be welcome in Syria. "There are a lot of problems we are facing, like rising prices in Syria and the money people brought from Iraq running out. And now we have the issue of bad relations between Syria and Iraq," one woman said. "We know that there are problems between the two countries, but we don't know how it will affect us. This is all politics, and the people suffer from it," another said.

"WE DON'T TRUST THE SITUATION IN IRAQ"

¶4. (C) At a crowded UNHCR registration center in Duma, Iraqis discussed their situation in Syria with Poloff. A group of

adolescents talked about their plans for the upcoming school year in Syria, stating they did not expect to continue their studies in Iraq in the near future. A teenager from Fallujah said she hoped to focus on literature in the upcoming school year, which would begin in early September. Several young men said they were hoping to pick up information technology skills they could use in the job market in the future. "Hopefully in Iraq, but if not in Europe or America," one of them added.

15. (C) Several of the community organizers and refugees at the Duma center expressed pessimism about the prospects of their returning to Iraq, heightening their concerns about their future in Syria if they cannot resettle in other countries. "We know that the media says that the situation is getting better in Iraq, but we basically don't trust anything they say. There is still kidnapping, bombings, assassination. We can't have a normal life with security there," one young woman said. "People ask us about Iraqis going back to Iraq, but they cannot return if they don't have homes and families to go back to," another said. "We don't trust the situation in Iraq, so we have to stay here."

UNHCR SEES UPTICK IN THE NUMBER OF IRAQI REFUGEES APPLYING FOR ASSISTANCE

16. (C) In an August 31 meeting with NGOs and donors, UNHCR Deputy Representative Philip Le Clerc said the UNHCR "is observing events between Syria and Iraq. We want to make sure that these events don't negatively affect Iraqi refugees here." He added the bilateral tensions came at a difficult

DAMASCUS 00000641 002 OF 002

time because UNHCR had just started to work with the Syrians and the Iraqis on implementing the first direct assistance program by the Iraqi government for its people in Syria. The GOI had proposed working with the UNHCR to provide Iraqi refugees with medications not readily available in Syria. "Now all of these efforts are on hold," Le Clerc explained.

17. (C) UNHCR staff report a steady flow of Iraqi refugees registering for assistance this year (20,000 to date), despite an overall decrease in the number of refugees. Nonetheless, UNHCR's Vadim Mackeyev said "there has been a noticeable increase last month" in the number of Iraqis registering for the first time for UNHCR assistance. "Even if there are fewer refugees leaving Iraq for Syria, there are many people who have been here for several years. Now, their money is running out, and they are coming to us and registering," he said.

18. (C) UNHCR Reporting Officer Carole Laleve noted that first-time registrations had also increased since the August 19 bombing. "It's still early and we are watching the figures, but we had 400 new cases late last week, and we think that some of this is related to the (August 19) attack." Le Clerc said he had heard that 20 percent of new registrants at Duma were "quoting directly" the events following the bombing.

SYRIAN COMMENTS ON REFUGEES

19. (C) While Iraqi refugees worry what the withdrawal of the ambassadors will mean for their future in Syria, we have heard a range of Syrian reactions regarding Iraqi demands for the transfer of wanted former Baathist elements. "If Iraq wants four Iraqis, it should be willing to take the other million who live here and receive support from the Syrian government," growled Wadah Abd Rabo (strictly protect), editor-in-chief of the privately-owned, pro-government daily "Al-Watan." Abd Rabo hastily added that he had received word that Asad himself wanted no hint by Syrian officials or media that the SARG would consider ending its support of Iraqi refugees. Stridently denying Iraqi accusations of Syrian involvement in terrorist attacks in Iraq, President Asad on August 31 said "Syria is keen on preserving the Iraqi people

and Iraqi interests, just as it is keen to protect the Syrian people and interests." "When Syria is accused of killing Iraqis when she is hosting a million and two hundred thousand Iraqis, it is an immoral accusation." Despite the SARG's statements that Iraqi refugees are safe in Syria, UNHCR outreach workers said Iraqis in Syria were closely following the news for any indication that their status would be affected by developments in the Syrian-Iraqi bilateral relationship.

¶10. (C) COMMENT. With the heated exchanges between Syrian and Iraqi officials, it is not surprising the large Iraqi refugee community here remains both reluctant to return to Iraq and concerned about how the recent events will affect them in Syria. For the moment, the UNHCR and other NGOs are monitoring events and expressing concern that Syrian-Iraqi tensions not affect the status of Iraqi refugees. Despite these tensions, thus far the SARG appears intent on continuing to assist Iraqis living in Syria. END COMMENT.
HUNTER